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## Their Road to the Buffalo

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THE KANZA PEOPLE  
*Kansas Historical Society*

### *Their Road to the Buffalo*

A few miles north and east of the symphony site the well-timbered valleys of the Cottonwood River and Middle and Diamond creeks provided good winter camping sites for the Kanza (or Kaw) Indians. In January and February, 1860, hundreds of Kanzas were encamped in these valleys, the women engaged in the work of tanning and dressing buffalo

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robes brought in from their autumn and winter hunt on the plains.

About fifty Kanzas of Chief Ebesunga's band were encamped on Cyrus G. Allen's place on Middle Creek. In late January, Emporia merchant A. G. Proctor came to the camp to trade. In addition to an unspecified number of buffalo robes, Proctor secured 500 wolf skins and a quantity of other furs. Valuing the robes at \$4.25 each and wolf skins at about 75 cents, the

merchant would sell the Indians the standard trade items: flour, coffee, sugar, tobacco, cotton cloth, wool blankets, utensils, and ammunition.



PLAINS INDIAN TIPI ENCAMPMENT.  
*Kansas Historical Society*



WIFE OF BEAR CATHCER *by Catlin*  
*Kansas Historical Society*

What was profitable to the merchants was a means of survival to the Indians. The \$8,000.00 “annuities” the U.S. government paid to the tribe each year afforded \$8.00 to each of the 1,000 members of the tribe (in 1860), hardly an amount to meet their basic needs. Because furs and robes were the only trade commodities available to the Kanzas, access to the requisite animals was crucial.

Access was provided by a network of well-established trails. One of these trails extended from the three Kanza Reservation villages located in the Neosho Valley a few miles southeast of Council Grove south through Chase County, crossing the Cottonwood River between Elmdale and Strong City. From here it struck south over the uplands to Sycamore Springs in Butler County. The Kanzas also used this trail to visit their Osage relatives.

When in mid-October 1859, Chief Ebesunga’s band left the village near present Dunlap westward bound for the buffalo grounds of central Kansas, they traveled over the primary Kaw Trail. This one-hundred-mile-long track stretched from the Kanza villages to the Cow Creek winter campsite in present Rice County.

Traced relative to modern features, the Kaw Trail passed through the village of Diamond Springs in Morris County; clipped one section of northwest Chase County (about 18 miles north of the symphony site); crossed Marion



County diagonally two miles south of Lincolnville, through the Marion Reservoir and Hillsboro; extended east-west in McPherson County a couple miles north of Moundridge, then passed near Inman; finally ending at the confluence of Big and Little Cow Creeks a couple miles south of Lyons.

The Kaw Trail ran roughly parallel to the Santa Fe Trail, the Indian route lying from three to nine miles south of the white man's road. Historian George

P. Morehouse, author of "Along the Kaw Trail" (Transactions of the KSHS, 1904), asserted "this [Kaw] trail had better grass and water along it than the Santa Fe trail."

Every fall and frequently in the summer the Kansas journeyed en masse over this trail, leaving behind in their lodges those too frail or sick to travel and a few caregivers. In 1860 the Kansas possessed an estimated 350 ponies, so many of the 900+ men, women, and



HUNTING BISON ON HORSEBACK.  
*Kansas Historical Society*



KANZA WARRIOR  
*Kansas Historical Society*

children walked, sometimes traveling only ten miles per day.

The Indians traveled in single file, the men mounted on the best ponies. However, Morehouse observed that the trail was not a single path, "... but in places the ground was cut up for a rod or two in width, and had many evidences of long usage." As a laborsaving measure, the Kanzas would

often leave the wooden frames of their small lodges intact at streamside campsites.

Although Cow Creek was their preferred camping site, upon arriving in buffalo country the tribe often dispersed in bands across central Kansas. Among the many places the Kanzas are known to have established hunting camps are the Little Arkansas River, Plum Creek, Turkey Creek, Smoky Hill River, Saline River, and Gypsum Creek.

The men were expert buffalo hunters who, although possessing firearms, often employed bows and arrows. In 1859 a white man witnessed a Kanza buffalo hunt near Beach's "ranche" [trading post] at Cow Creek: "The four stripped themselves and sprang on their horses with bows and arrows and followed the buffalo...the Indians got ahead of the buffalo and ran him nearly back to the ranche and the buffalo was so worn out, that he stopped to give fight. The Indians then shot





BISON HUNTING CAMP by Catlin  
Kansas Historical Society

five arrows in the buffalo, all of which went through and before the buffalo was fairly down they were by the side of the buffalo and had all the arrows out, which was done to save them breaking the arrows in the field.”

Often the Kanza women prepared large quantities of “Buffalo jerk” at their hunting camps. They stripped or “jerked” the meat into strips, weaved these into large mats, which were

spread over willow frames surmounting a small fire, which would roast and dry the meat. Although these were desirable commercial articles in the white settlements, most of the dried meat was packed back to the Neosho River villages for the tribe’s winter and spring sustenance.

The hunts were crucial to the survival of the Kanzas for two additional reasons: the buffalo robes

and furs gathered during these hunts earned the Kanzas up to as much as \$12,000.00 a year in trade value; and in the winter the short buffalo and grama grasses of central Kansas were more nutritious than the bluestem grasses of the Flint Hills, thus providing vital nourishment at a critical time to the all-important pony herds.

Sometimes the hunts were successful. The winter hunt of 1857-58 netted the Kanza 1,800 robes, and in the winter hunt of 1865-66 the tribe killed nearly 3,000 buffalo. The return home was described by Morehouse: "...the pack ponies reeled under the weight of plunder or tugged at loads borne on two long poles fastened to their sides and extending back like long shafts, dragging on the ground. Often on top of a load of fresh or dried meat a squaw and papoose would be perched, in all the glory of Indian life."

One of the last successful hunts was conducted in the mild winter of 1868-69. The Kanzas returned in

April, "looking gaudy and feeling gay" according to the Council Grove newspaper editor. "They had plenty of robes" and had acquired a good number of ponies. When they got to their villages "they were met by an ovation."

However, the 1859-60 hunt had not been so successful. Kanza agent Milton Dickey estimated that the tribe's take of robes and furs that year was worth only \$2,500, which he attributed to the effect of a terrible drought. "The most of their time has been spent in hunting;" Dickey reported. "...at sometimes during the year [1860] they have been very destitute, not having a sufficiency to satisfy the demands of hunger."

Usually the Kanzas returned over the same trail to their Council Grove Reservation in the winter, arriving at their Neosho villages (located 35 miles northeast of the symphony site) sometimes as early as Christmas. However, in the late 1850s white squatters had overrun the Kanza Reservation, and in response, Ebesunga



and other Kanza chiefs led their people straight east to the upper Cottonwood River valley, where they established camps just a few miles north and east of the symphony site.

Although there were good hunts during the 1860s, the Kansas increasingly found themselves in a desperate and often violent competition with the powerful Cheyenne tribe for the prime buffalo hunting grounds of central Kansas. In December 1867 the Kanza agent reported "...as matters now stand the Kaws are not allowed to hunt on the plains as the Cheyenne are much the stronger party,...."

The early 1870s proved disastrous. Head chief Allegawaho stated that the winter of 1870-71 was "very cold we lost a large number of ponies and were thus hindered from bringing in the usual amount of robes, & dried meat." In 1871-72 one third of their ponies succumbed to the cold and starvation and the Indians killed no buffalo. In 1872-73, the Kansas' last winter in Kansas, few of

the tribe took the trail west to buffalo country because of "their old hunting grounds being settled up by the whites."

In June 1873 the 600 remaining Kansas were relocated to their new

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reservation in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). After the Kansas' removal, the Kaw trail became a wagon road for white people, a route for cattle drives, and a starting-point to burn backfires to control prairie fires. As late as the 1890s unplowed segments of the trail's margins were marked by rows of sunflowers.

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*Ron Parks was administrator of the Kaw Mission State Historic Site 1990-94 and 1999-2004. He resides in Council Grove.*